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with Black Bears



United States
Department of
Agriculture

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PREPARED BY North Central Forest
Forest Service Experiment Station

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Black bears can swim to island campsites.

availability of food, often becoming nocturnal to avoid confrontations with us rather than sleeping at night like they usually do.

Campers wonder—

“How can I protect my food?”

“What should I do if a bear comes into camp?”

“How dangerous are black bears?”

How to Protect Your Food and Property

The best way to prevent food pilfering in bear country is to avoid the bears. That means by-passing campsites with bear tracks, fecal droppings, and scattered garbage. Bears are regular visitors there. But if you must camp at such

sites, keep a clean camp. The less food odor in your camp the less chance the bears will linger when they make their rounds. Wash dishes immediately and dump the water away from the camp. Completely burn any edible garbage, including grease, rather than burying it or throwing it in a latrine.

Most black bears will not enter a tent with people in it, but it is still a good idea to keep food and food odors out of tents and sleeping bags. To be on the safe side, wash food from your face and hands before going to bed and hang clothing beyond reach of bears if it has food or cooking grease on it. Perfume may mask human odor, preventing bears from knowing a person is in the tent.

Bearproof food lockers and portable bearproof containers provide the best protection for your food but are not yet available everywhere. The next best thing is to store food in the trunk of your automobile or in sealed plastic bags suspended from a line between two trees.

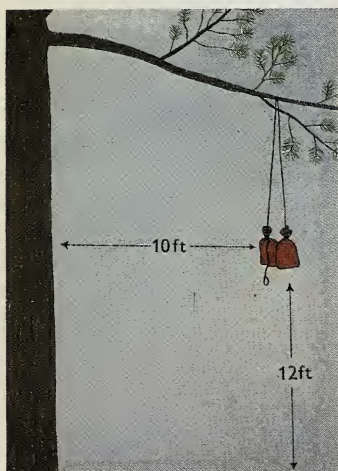


Photo by Bob Roney.

Lines or horizontal poles 20 feet above the ground have been installed at some bear-prone campsites. Sling the food bags over the line or pole so they hang 5 feet below it, at least 10 feet from the nearest tree trunk, and at least 12 feet above the ground. Bears have been known to leap from tree trunks to snatch food bags, and large black bears

can reach up nearly 9 feet without jumping. Slinging the bag over a branch rather than a line or pole is even less likely to stop a bear; bears can break small branches and climb out on large ones. If a branch must be used, sling the bag far out on the tip of a branch larger than 4 inches in base diameter. Bears sometimes chew through ropes to get hanging food bags, so it is best to counterbalance the bag with a second one to avoid tying the rope where a bear can bite it. To retrieve counterbalanced bags, use a long stick to push one bag up so the other will descend to within reach.

Where bears already know about food being hung, hanging it might be only a delaying tactic to give you time to personally protect it. Pans hung on the food bag so they

will rattle if a bear shakes it can alert you. Nonburnable garbage should also be hung and should be packed out when you leave.

Bears learn that coolers, backpacks, food bags, and other containers might contain food. Keeping empty containers out of sight (in a car trunk or away from camp) or leaving them open so bears can easily determine they are empty will reduce property damage. If the containers smell of food, hang them with the plastic food bags to prevent bears from carrying them off. Food odors in empty containers are minimized if the food was packed in plastic bags that can be taken out of the containers and hung. When leaving camp, tie tent flaps open so bears can easily check inside.

What to Do If a Black Bear Visits

A black bear in camp requires caution but is not cause for great alarm. Most are timid enough to be scared away by yelling, waving, and banging pans. But a few are too accustomed to people to be bothered. Many people have lost their food and vacation by being timid. Campers experienced with black bears simply chase them away before the bears settle in to eating a week's supply of vacation food. They make sure the bear has a clear escape route and then yell, wave, and rush to no nearer than 15 feet of the bear. This is especially effective when several



Black bear mothers sometimes bluff-charge but rarely attack people. They usually run away.

people do it together. If alone, a person might create the illusion of numbers by throwing sticks through the underbrush. Don't feed the bears or try to pet them. Touching a wild bear can elicit a nip or cuff.

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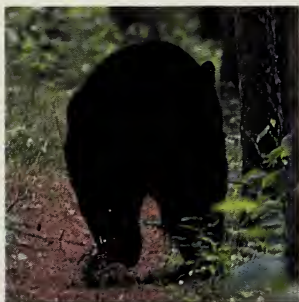


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A recent study by the National Park Service showed that bears sometimes are harder to chase after they have begun eating. Some bears in that study gave low intensity threats when people slowly approached closer than 15 feet, but all bears that were chased retreated. No visitors were attacked. People are often more timid at night, but bears retreat at night as well as by day.

Capsaicin spray repellent usually persuades black bears to leave when it is sprayed into their eyes. Capsaicin,

Black bears usually run away when people chase them or spray Capsaicin in their eyes.

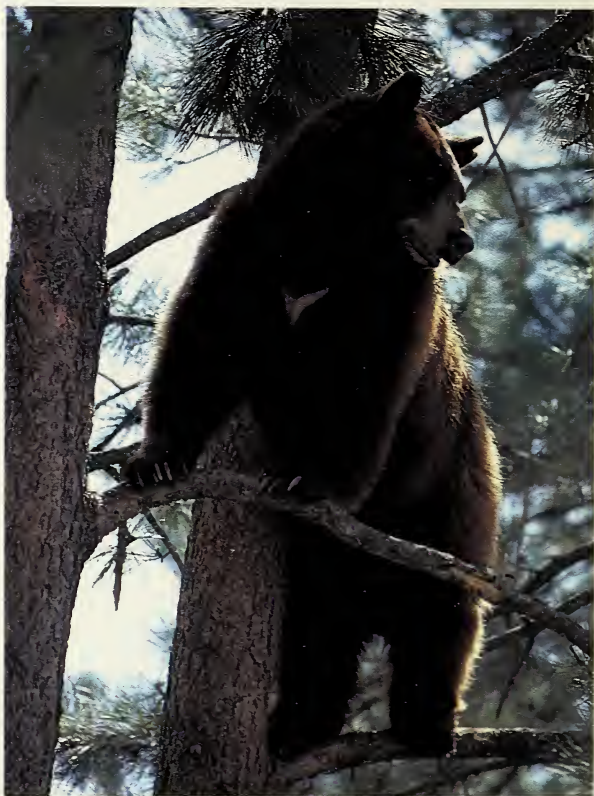


the active ingredient of cayenne peppers, has long been used by mailmen as a dog repellent. In more than 200 trials, no bear gave any sign of anger after being sprayed, sometimes repeatedly. Most immediately turned and ran, stopping eventually to rub their eyes. The repellent irritates the eyes for several minutes but causes no injury.

How Dangerous are Black Bears?

Black bears can injure or kill people, but they rarely do. When pressed, they usually retreat, even with cubs. Attacking to defend cubs is more a grizzly bear trait. (Grizzlies live only in Alaska, northern and western Canada, and the Rocky Mountains south to Yellowstone.) Black bear mothers often leave their cubs and flee from people, and those that remain are more likely to bluff-charge than attack. Still, it is prudent to use extra caution with family groups that allow close approaches because mothers are generally more nervous than other bears. Nevertheless, chances of being attacked around campsites

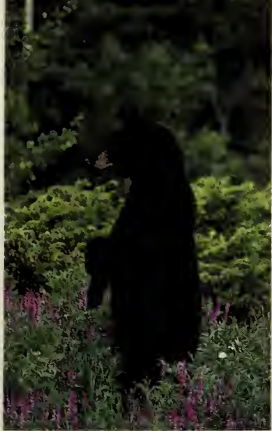
by any black bear are small. During a 19-year study of bear/camper encounters in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, only two injuries were reported in 19 million visitor-days. The study included the



Both black bears and grizzlies can be brown, but no grizzlies live east of the Rocky Mountains.

year 1985 when bear nuisance activity was at a record high. The two injuries were by one bear on September 14 and 15, 1987. The bear was killed the next day.

Unprovoked, predatory attacks by black bears are rare but highly publicized. Such attacks have accounted for all 23 deaths by noncaptive black bears across North America this century. Most occurred in remote areas where the bears had little or no previous contact with people, rather than in and around established campsites. The worst attack occurred in Ontario in 1978 when a black bear killed and partially consumed three teen-agers who were fishing. Predatory attacks by black bears are usually done without bluster or warning. People involved in such attacks can improve their chances by fighting rather than playing dead. Deaths from such attacks average a little more than one every four years across the United States and Canada.



*A sign of curiosity,
not anger, standing
helps bears see and smell.*

By comparison, a person is about 180 times more likely to be killed by a bee than by a black bear and 160,000 times more likely to die in a traffic accident. Each year there are many thousands of encounters between black bears and

people, often unknown to the people because the bears slip away so quietly. Menstrual odors have been shown to be attractive to bears, but there is no record of a black bear attacking a menstruating woman.

Dozens of minor injuries, some requiring stitches, have occurred across North America when people petted or crowded black bears they were feeding or photographing. Under those circumstances, black bears may react to people as they do to bears with bad manners, by nipping or cuffing with little or no warning. Also, people who tease bears with food have been accidentally injured when the bear quickly tried to take it. Fortunately, black bears usually use at least as much restraint with people as they do with each other. Unlike domestic dogs, which often are territorial and aggressive toward strangers, black bears typically behave as the subordinate toward people when escape is possible.

*Most injuries from black bears are minor and
result from feeding, crowding, or petting.*



Black bears that want our food sometimes use threats or bluffs to get it, as has been reported by campers, picnickers, and backpackers. The most common behavior of this sort is blowing, which may be accompanied by clacking teeth, lunging, laid back ears, slapping the ground or trees, and/or a short rush. The same behavior is used to scare other bears from feeding areas. The sounds and actions are all done explosively, with effective results. However, it is rare for a black bear to attack a person during or after such a demonstration. All blowing bears observed by the author retreated when pursued. A less common sound is the resonant "voice" of a bear. This is used to express intense emotions (fear, pain, and pleasure), including strong threats. Black bears with ready escape routes seldom use this threat toward people. Grunts are used in nonthreatening communication to cubs, familiar bears, and sometimes people.

Encounters with bears are remembered and retold for years to come. Most campers in black bear country never see a bear. Seeing one is proof that we still have extensive enough forests for this wide-ranging animal. Keeping a clean camp helps to insulate bears from the effects of our increasing use of the wilderness for recreation and helps prevent bears from being needlessly relocated or killed as nuisances.



*Text and photos by Lynn L. Rogers.
(Information and reviews for this
brochure were obtained from Federal,
State, and Provincial biologists, university
researchers, and managers of national
parks and forests throughout the
United States and Canada.)*

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